

Testimony of Mid-Rivers Communications

March 6, 2013 - House Bill 575

Federal Relations, Energy & Telecommunications Committee

Montana House of Representatives

Mid-Rivers Communications would like to ask for your support of House Bill 575 as a balanced approach to fixing unintended consequences of previous legislation and to hopefully help improve 9-1-1 access in Montana. House Bill 575 makes some of the surplus wireless provider funding available to our State's local Public Safety Answering Points (PSAPs), but it also attempts to address provider needs first, which was the original intent of this funding. This bill would pay off the outstanding provider balances of approved cost recovery requests, and insure that balances would still be allowed to build in the small rural counties so that funds will be available to help cover future 9-1-1 wireless provider expenses in these areas.

Mid-Rivers is a cooperative telecommunications provider based in Circle, Montana. We also operate a cellular network covering about 10,000 square miles of remote rural area in Eastern Montana. We became a wireless provider specifically for the purpose of filling in cellular coverage in the areas that were not being served by the national providers. The map included with your handout illustrates how we have filled in coverage in rural areas that were previously unserved with wireless coverage and 9-1-1 access. It also shows that gaps in coverage remain, which probably isn't news to any of us and isn't unique to the Eastern half of Montana. As a telecommunications provider probably the number one concern we hear from our members, including our Counties, is the public safety concern associated with remaining dead spots in cellular coverage.

Mid-Rivers is struggling to cover these remote areas in Eastern and Central Montana, so we have not been opposed to providing our subscriber and expense information in return for some cost recovery on the expenditures we make to provide public safety services to our area. We have worked very closely with the State's 9-1-1 office to access the wireless provider funding reimbursements available within the existing statute, but the current law is extremely restrictive on the provider side. These restrictions, and the limitations that allow us to draw funding from only a very limited pool of dollars while millions of provider dollars sit unused, hamper our ability to recover our 9-1-1 costs and put more of our resources to work improving cellular coverage in rural Montana.

We can argue all day about funding formulas and FCC orders and who should or shouldn't get this money, but none of us can stand here and say we support public safety and 9-1-1 but it's OK that there isn't 9-1-1 coverage in large parts of our state. Mid-Rivers currently has an outstanding balance of approximately \$280,000 in approved 9-1-1 expenditures that under the current statute will take nearly three years to be paid off. This does not include any future large capital expenditures that we know are coming to meet Next Generation 9-1-1 mandates. If those expenditures could be reimbursed sooner through the provider funding that is available today, these dollars could be put back to work expanding coverage in unserved areas.

Counties and cities in our area agree with the need to make providers like Mid-Rivers whole before transferring out these PROVIDER dollars, because they understand that a successful 911 call requires that we adequately fund both the providers and the PSAPs. Saving lives in Montana depends on a strong partnership between the PSAPs and the providers. The Montana Legislature recognized that there was a provider need for 9-1-1 funding when they passed the original legislation establishing this PROVIDER fund. They recognized that Montana is a vast state with unique needs and they valued the provider contribution to our state's 911 efforts. Carriers like Mid-Rivers do have a need, because we are trying to serve areas like Sand Springs in Garfield County, or Ridgway in Carter County. Simply transferring millions of dollars to PSAPs who already receive \$0.75 of every 9-1-1 dollar will not increase 9-1-1 access to areas where it is not already available today.

It is easy to wonder why any of us should care about these complicated funding issues, or why a constituent in Missoula County might care whether or not there is cell phone service and 9-1-1 access in rural Carter County. The fact is, however, that when that constituent, or you or I, have a family member that might decide to travel through that beautiful County in the Southeastern corner of our state, maybe hunting or snowmobiling, and that family member becomes injured and needs to make a 9-1-1 call, at that point in time it WILL matter. Without a doubt, lives have already been lost due to the inability to make a 911 call from a remote area in Montana where there isn't any wireless coverage. We have the opportunity today to help make sure that future lives are saved today by passing HB 575.

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